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'Spy' Novels

Intelligence Failures: Where Do These Writers Get This Stuff?

By John Horton

WRITING ABOUT Charles Dickens, George Orwell once observed: "A thing that strikes one when one looks below the surface to Dickens's books is that . . . he is rather ignorant. He knows very little about the way things really happen."

As a former intelligence officer who spent much of his life running agents and operations, I feel the same way about spy novelists. They need the jargon, the obsessive talk about gadgets, the excess of detail, the endless excitement, to fill up what might otherwise be noticed as all that empty space.

What happens, then, when an intelligence officer like me undertakes to write a spy novel that will say what it was really like? It's a problem. For a great deal of life in an intelligence agency is as humdrum as in any other organization. Rather than leaping from the dark bridge of a ship to the deck of the Soviet vessel with the hostages aboard, he is more likely to be sitting tired-eyed at his desk that night, proofreading an intelligence report. Instead of tossing the live grenade back at the sneering terrorist, he is found arguing with a coldhearted finance officer about his expense account. He may have

John Horton's first novel, "The Hotel at Tarasco," will be published next year. He submitted this article to the CIA for approval.

dreamed of exchanging witty banter with his KGB opposite number at cocktails, but instead his wife pulls at his coattail and hisses: "What a bore! Let's get out of here." His loyal subordinate is less likely to be covering him as he runs into the burning building to defuse the bomb than to be sitting across the desk from him imploring that he withdraw an observation he made in the subordinate's last fitness report.

So the intelligence-officer-turned-writer, with a clear memory of the essential drabness of intelligence work, may decide to fudge a bit. Despite his earnestness to correct the world's misunderstandings of what he spent his life doing, he may try to emulate the rattling good spy novel on the bedside table. It is probably full of violence. In this, spy novels and real life do not often coincide.

The most violent act I encountered during an entire year in one post abroad was carried out by the irascible ambassador. Enraged at the quite proper refusal of the administrative officer to break regulations on his behalf, the ambassador hurled an inkwell across the room. Ducking respectfully, the administrative officer watched the bottle whiz by to explode harmlessly on the wall behind him. It was said that a CIA officer who happened to be passing saw this exchange and, turning pale, had to be helped to the embassy infirmary.

No doubt violent things are more

likely to happen to a CIA officer than to a Trappist monk. But the KGB is far busier and probably happier brutalizing Soviet citizens than CIA officers. For the intelligence officer the pen is more useful than the pistol, the typewriter than the trench knife, the word processor than the laser beam.

Then there is the character of the spy himself. In spy novels, the hero is not allowed to be naive, nor may he do the dumb things a real intelligence officer spends his retirement trying to forget.

And the hero, finally, must not only be seen struggling with a tough problem of no small import to page one, but he must solve it all by himself before the book ends—a rarer accomplishment than the average intelligence officer may care to remember.

Of course, no one thinks that cowboy stories are the true history of the American West. So, who cares if the clichés of the spy novel incidentally give us a silly or sinister view of intelligence work?

I suppose it just comes down to the exchange I had with a friend some years ago. I said that I enjoyed Le Carré's books but that his highly individual depiction of the British Secret Intelligence Service hardly resembled the world I knew.

My friend, who had no more acquaintance with actual intelligence work than can be gained by driving on Route 123 past the CIA building, was indignant: "Waddya mean? Of course it's a perfect picture."